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521 innovative impulses are recreative or aesthetic, either in content or form.
522 Simply stated, the reason Bang Chaners may spend more time than West-
182 erners in telling amusing stories to each other is because they feel they are gaining something new and worthwhile from the experience.

Politeness: A Social Cosmetic

57 It has been previously noted that the villagers' ubiquitous politeness appears in several different forms: sometimes it is associated with a genial interest in others or a concern over their welfare and comfort; at other times it is used as a means of handling one's anxiety over the intentions of others or one's uncertainty over the nature and purpose of the relationship; and at other times, it is used as a means of impressing others or getting in their good graces. The term "social cosmetic" is used here because it embraces at one time all these varying usages. A cosmetic not only makes one appear more attractive and conceals one's blemishes, real or imagined, but permits one to deal with others more easily and comfortably. The last consideration is in part a direct consequence of the first two, that is, a person who feels he is attractive to others will in all likelihood be more relaxed in his relationships with them. However, it is probably also a product of the conventionalized, relatively explicit interactional "frame" [12] that the very wearing of the cosmetic creates. The cosmetic indicates that regardless of his basic intentions, the person will conduct himself properly and agreeably; it defines the presence of and prompts conformity to certain behavioral rituals which simplify for the participants the kinds of behavior they may express. In a sense, the cosmetic of politeness represents one of the most "civilized" modes of social interaction: it is based on a fundamental concern with structuring one's behavior (again, irrespective of intentions) so as least to disturb others and thus permit them to act in socially easy, uncomplicated ways. Further, it stresses respect for the dignity and psychological integrity of others. The actual topic of conversation or non-verbal ritual that links the participating individuals together may be either meaningful or inconsequential, but that is essentially irrelevant when compared to the fact that the respect the participants feel for each other is being communicated. In

[12] This term is somewhat akin to what Goffman (1959: 22–24), in his attempt to analyze behavior in a dramaturgical framework, calls the "setting" or the "scenic aspects" of the interactional situation. However, Goffman's terms refer explicitly to the physical layout—the furniture, decor, and the like—of the behavioral situation rather than to the psychological "setting" that is created by the behavior of the participating individuals. On the other hand, his term, "personal front," refers exclusively to the attributes of individuals, rather than to the situational definitions that they create. The term "frame" used here refers to the psychological setting which is created by the behavior of individuals and which defines for all participants the nature of the situation.

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essence, much of the villagers' interaction is based on certain formal, rather than substantive, considerations,[14] the net effect of which is to minimize the impact that they might have upon each other but to maximize each person's sense of psychic independence and integrity.

Our phrasing here is principally in analytic not evaluative terms. However, it should be clear that from an evaluative point of view, there are both "positive" and "negative" consequences to the continuing use of this interactive mode. On the positive side, the villagers' politeness contributes to their extraordinary tolerance for nonconformity, personal deviance, failure, or the inability of individuals to live up to standards. In effect, the villagers seem to be saying that if another person is poor, weak, stupid, or naïve, that is essentially his own business (or problem), not cause for ridicule or even amelioration. People are publicly accepted and respected for what they are, despite their shortcomings. The sense of psychological security that such treatment affords is clear: it means that no matter what an individual's status or personal qualities may be, he can generally expect to be treated well by others. The canons of courtesy require this. On the other hand, to have to be continually sensitive to one's effect on others is, from ego's point of view, not without its psychic costs. Thus, although politeness is aimed at keeping social relationships smooth and uncomplicated, it frequently results in a lack of spontaneity and in the inhibition of genuine feelings. A cosmetic is supposed to enhance one's natural qualities, but inevitably it also conceals them.

To what extent this concealment "troubles" the villagers is most difficult to determine. There clearly are circumstances in which certain negative consequences follow directly from such concealment. But whether villagers are generally unhappy because they cannot express what they feel is problematic. Their admiration for individuals who "speak their feelings from their hearts" is occasionally unmitigated; but far more frequently, they speak of the "kindness" and "good hearts" of those who hide their feelings "so as not to hurt others."[15]

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[14] All interaction is of course based on *both* formal and substantive considerations. The issue here is the relative emphasis given to one over the other, and how one may even be used as a substitute for the other when presenting the self.

[15] The case of Dang (Hanks and Phillips 1961) referred to earlier is an excellent example of the kinds of difficulty that may follow from the concealment of one's real sentiments. Dang's story is a somewhat plaintive tale: how, because of his anxiety about revealing his true feelings to his father, uncle, and aunt (his social superiors) he lost a house, some land, and married a girl he "did not quite want to." Yet at all times he maintained courteous relationships with all concerned. What is most significant about Dang's case, however, is the position of psychic isolation to which politeness brought him. Basically, Dang substituted in his relationships with his relatives the *form* of politeness for the more enduring *substance* of love, loyalty, and obligation. Rather than trust to the strength of such sentiments to help resolve his

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are social peers, the Bang Chaners would easily turn the conversation to a discussion of the technical aspects of rice farming or even gambling. The latter would likely be discussed with a social superior only after some acquaintance. On the other hand, if one were clearly the other's superior, the superior would probably talk not about the methods of rice farming but, more generally and benignly, inquire, "Is all going well with you? Is there any way I might help you?" He might even proffer some unsolicited advice or aid. The tone and theme of the conversation would be expressive largely of the superior's concern with the welfare of his new-found friend, which the latter would typically accept.

All this is usually accompanied by gentle laughter and careful attention to appropriate pronominal forms. The good host will also serve his guest rain water, and if possible, scented rain water. If opportunity and finances permit, he may even offer him a warm Coca-Cola. The youngster who will actually serve the refreshment will make sure that it is on a coaster and that his hands are in the proper ritual position when he offers the drink to the guest. Such are the ingredients from which potential friendships are made.

Although the particulars of the kind of politeness found among family and friends are different from the above, the forms are essentially the same. Villagers do not talk about the funny accents of the people who live next door to them, nor do they rush to serve scented water when a brother comes to call. But they do take pains to express respect for each other by using proper honorific and pronominal forms, by looking to the oldest competent family member for advice, by talking of subjects that are pleasant and amusing, but never threatening or embarrassing.

The avoidance of embarrassing topics—even when the airing of such topics may be crucially important or beneficial to one of the parties concerned—is one of the most pronounced facets of village social life. To a Westerner accustomed to outspokenness, the types of situations that villagers define as embarrassing and the lengths to which they will go to avoid them sometimes appear to border on the sado-masochistic. Detailed interviews with two women whose husbands had taken second wives, for example, indicate that although at the time they were deeply disturbed by their husbands' actions (primarily for economic reasons; secondarily for emotional-sexual ones) they never once even brought the subject up with their husbands. They explained that they were too *?aaj* (embarrassed) to do so. In neither case was this embarrassment expressive of any feeling of inadequacy on their parts (the fear of hearing their husbands say, "I took a second wife because you are not adequate"). It was prompted rather by the desire to avoid an awkward and potentially rancorous confrontation. They did not want to put anybody on the spot. (Whether such a confrontation would *actually* lead to overt rancor is almost impossible to ascertain because

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181 it in fact so rarely takes place. In fact, the "hypotheses" of these women are
152 perfect manifestations of what, in the technical sense, is *anxiety* rather than
•57 *fear* about what might occur.) The marital situations of both these women
*156 have since been routinized so that they have come to accept the second wives as part of their normal domestic lives. However, the vehemence with which they report these incidents indicates that at the time they paid for their wish to avoid embarrassment with considerable psychic distress. In terms of the basic attitudes involved, these situations were not too unlike that which obtained for Dang: to avoid a potentially sticky social situation, politeness and complete silence were maintained.

Somewhat different order from the above are the numerous instances where "good friends" will avoid reporting to each other unhappy or distressing information although it is clearly to the other's advantage to have such information in order better to cope with the difficulty. In one case, a villager had been working for weeks on a land sale deal which would have netted him a brokerage fee of two thousand *baht* (approximately one hundred dollars, a considerable sum in a community where the average annual family income is, before expenses, only eighty-five hundred *baht*). A friend had meanwhile learned that another villager, with whom he was not at all close, had sweet-talked the customer into permitting him to handle the sale, much to the detriment of his own friend, the original broker. However, rather than warn the friend of what was happening, he simply said nothing. When asked to explain why he kept his silence, he said that he was just too *ʔaaj* to speak up. Although the consequences of "ʔaaj-ness" were in this case more extreme than usual, the situation itself was not. In another, less dramatic instance a villager mentioned to us that in coming across the rice fields that afternoon he had noticed that his neighbor's windmill had broken down. The belt connecting the windmill to the irrigating machine used in raising water into the fields had slipped from the drive shaft. However, despite the obvious importance of this fact to his neighbor—the planting of his rice seedlings was completely dependent on the noria raising a sufficient amount of water into the field at the right time—the friend failed to tell his neighbor what had happened. When asked why, he said that he was *ʔaaj* about making his friend unhappy.

181 What is important about the above illustrations is not so much their
152 typicality—one can cite instances where friends are considerably more
*156 realistic and helpful—but rather the legitimacy of the rationalizations of the
[578] inactive friends. All Bang Chaners can understand and accept the reluctance of a villager to be the person who actually triggers off another individual's discomfort. There is a genuine (albeit misplaced) sense of responsibility about not making another unhappy. What is important is the immediate, face-to-face situation. If a person must ultimately suffer, that is his own problem; but at least the friend can say, "I did not 'cause' it."

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Villagers also recognize the reluctance of an individual to become involved in another person's problems on the grounds of avoiding the accusation of *actually* having caused them. They say (but again, empirical instances of this type are very hard to find) that frequently the person with good intentions is turned on by the very friend he is trying to help, for example, "Since you know so much about the broken windmill perhaps you were the one who broke it!" Both these attitudes result from a rather overinflated view of one's importance to the friend, as if the friend would be more concerned with the agent of information than with the information itself. This is not so much a confusion of means and ends as a re-identification of them. Finally, some of the villagers' reluctance is probably also due to simple indifference or laziness regarding the plight of the friend.

Other expressions of the "ʔaaj-ness" complex are more clearly altruistic than the above. Villagers explain, for example, that the reason there is never any more than one candidate for the post of hamlet or commune headman, on the rare occasions when such elections are held, is to avoid embarrassing the individuals involved. The eventual headman would be embarrassed because the presence of a competitor would suggest doubt about his competence; the candidate who lost would be embarrassed by the very fact that he lost. To avoid hurt feelings, only one candidate is presented, voted on, and elected.

We have been talking above about politeness primarily in a negative sense, that is, about the lengths to which villagers will go to *avoid* discomforting others or upsetting peaceful relationships. This aspect was stressed because its expressions represent a somewhat unique form of patterned social interaction. However, the many positive forms of the villagers' politeness to friends and kin should not be minimized: their concern with choosing topics of conversation they think will interest or entertain others; their search for opportunities to flatter them, sometimes in pseudo-mocking fashion, but more often to make them feel good; their attention to providing others with a pleasing audience—being silent, attentive, and eager when others are declaiming on a favorite subject. Of course, many times the villagers are not listening, but they try to behave as if they were. The aim here is to make others feel that what they are saying is worthwhile. An important part of this is that one almost never directly challenges the veracity or logic of the speaker's statements. If disbelief is the only appropriate response, it should be done silently. Nothing except personal pain and interpersonal tension would be gained from a direct challenge. If one feels strongly enough about the issue, which is very rare,[16] the presentation of an *alternative* view would not be inappropriate. But one

[16] The rarity of strong feelings is due to the fact that so often the very purpose of such conversations is to convey politeness and nothing more. The actual topic of conversation is simply a medium of contact, not a matter to be seriously discussed.

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• 57 must be extremely careful not to phrase it as a direct refutation of the speaker. Again, there is present in this approach the Thai assumption that the most important aspect of a social relationship is the psychic comfort and welfare of the persons involved, not the truth or validity of the matter under discussion. The overriding ethic is that each person not only has a right to be heard, but should be made to feel comfortable as well.

57 152 *156 Related to the above, but distinctive enough to require a category of its own, is the form of politeness expressed in the villagers' nervous laughter and in their preoccupation with inconsequential topics of conversation. Laughter and smiling is such a universal attribute of Thai demeanor (an early volume on Siam by W. A. R. Wood was in fact entitled *Land of Smiles*) that it is not always easy to distinguish precisely between this particular form and other more relaxed expressions of lightheartedness. From the point of view of social intention—to be appealing and inoffensive to others—they are probably not distinguishable. What sets this form apart is mainly the situation in which it is found: a villager is apt to laugh nervously when talking about unhappy or unfortunate experiences. Likewise he will laugh or resort to inconsequential topics when trying to get something from another person or knowing that someone is trying to get something from him, in either case being unsure of how the other person will react; when meeting a person, often of higher status, for the first time and feeling compelled to relate to him, but not knowing quite how. Again, this mode of interaction is clearly not unique to Bang Chan. However, villagers resort to it so frequently, or define so many situations as the kind necessitating its use, that it emerges as one of the most salient modalities of Thai interaction. In a sense, the nervousness that is betrayed indicates some of the internal strain that villagers undergo in maintaining a constant front of politeness.

152 *156 828 It should be noted, however, that they are well aware of their uneasiness: they will often admit it to you in more relaxed moments. Also, other villagers in attendance can immediately spot it, and will tell you that the person was nervous. What is so characteristically nice about the villagers, however, is that they will almost never take advantage of a person's nervousness to score a point for themselves. Uneasiness is defined simply as a neutral personality trait, part of the way in which an individual presents himself and not a symptom of psychic weakness. In fact, from the point of view of influencing the purpose or direction of an interaction, it is usually ignored. What is *socially* important is that a person act nicely, not how he feels about the way he acts; the latter is his own business. It might further be noted that the recognition of one's own uneasiness, without at the same time feeling threatened by its exposure, is symptomatic of the villager's relatively strong ego structure. A Bang Chaner can maintain a certain

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to be somewhat nervous. Like the conversational topics mentioned above, its purpose is to maintain social contact, but at a minimal substantive level.

Other uses of giggling are less consciously purposeful than the above. Perhaps the most frequent instance of this is when villagers are talking about or responding directly to an unfortunate situation: a flood destroying the rice crop, a friend or relative dying or being beaten up, a person committing suicide. Giggling under these circumstances seems to represent several related sentiments. On the one hand, it indicates a slight feeling of embarrassment over having discovered something or talked about something which would have been better left undiscovered and undiscussed. At the same time, it is an attempt to make light of the misfortune by suggesting that the speaker and those present should not be overly pained by what they are encountering. Giggling here serves very much the same kind of function as the phrase *maj pen raj* ("it is nothing") referred to earlier; it is a means of shrugging off and denying a feeling of distress. Finally, giggling often is also a kind of ironic commentary on the human situation—not in any abstract philosophical way, but in the sense that a tragedy is so often actually felt to be a comic exposure of human hopes and intentions. A little exchange between the writer and an elderly villager perhaps best illustrates this. During one of the two rainy seasons I spent in Thailand, the rains were especially heavy in the Central Plain and destroyed the rice crop of many Bang Chan farms. As might be expected, it was a topic of considerable discussion. Paddling down the canal one morning, we met a villager who was returning from inspecting his fields, and we stopped to chat. The discussion inevitably turned to the flood, and he told us, in a completely matter-of-fact way, that he had already lost about 50 percent of his crop. He then giggled nervously over what he had said, and followed it up with, "But that person over there has lost everything." His giggles then turned into laughter as he nodded his head in an attitude of pain. Months later, when things were considerably more comfortable for the villager (as it turned out, he had lost only about 5 percent of his crop) I recalled our meeting and asked him what he thought was so funny about the flood. He did not remember, but volunteered in a nice, didactic way: "When something like a flood happens, all you can do is laugh."

Giggling is also a favored mode of dealing with the countless situations that arise in daily life that are perceived by the villagers as potentially, or imminently, embarrassing. Here giggling is a substitute for an explanation of one's actions, particularly those that are considered annoying to others. Villagers who have missed an *important* appointment (lesser ones are missed with few qualms) will tend to giggle when they finally meet the person and there is the slightest indication of the latter's displeasure.

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Giggling is very often used in the marketplace when an item must be bargained over. Similarly, a villager who wants to quit working for another will usually preface his request with some giggling, although equally often he will just leave—saying absolutely nothing—and will later send a middleman to collect his wages and make the severance official. The latter alternative is prompted by the desire to avoid *all* awkwardness.

The third major form of the villagers' politeness—that associated with making a good impression on others—has to a certain extent been covered by the materials already presented. Thus, in terms of the actual manifestations, there is really little difference between flattering another person, for example, because it will make him feel good, because it will make getting something out of him much easier, or because it will make one appear much more attractive in his eyes. However, it is clear that the motivations in these three cases are all quite different. It is for this reason that this last category has been introduced. When villagers meet another person whom they regard as significant (and this by no means includes all their contacts) they do put forth considerable effort to make a good impression on him. And being polite—courteous, helpful, flattering—is one of the most suitable means for achieving this effect.

Discussion of this interactive mode would perhaps not be necessary were villagers themselves not so keenly aware of it. Village children are continually and consciously taught, by word and deed, the necessity always to put their best foot forward (cf. the earlier illustrations in *Characteristics of a Good Person*). Bang Chaners assess themselves and others in terms of their capacity to make themselves appealing: both the "good" and the "competent" person is one who can make himself attractive by speaking softly, gently, and if possible, beautifully and cleverly. Often villagers take offense at an individual who refuses to do this because his very refusal suggests that he does not feel respect for others. Again, it should be emphasized that we are talking here about the form of behavior, not the substance or commitment behind it.

What the ultimate psychological roots of this behavior are is unclear. It is apparent—largely because of the great attention given to formal considerations such as manners, proper speech, and the like—that this concern is not prompted primarily by the desire to be loved by others. Love would require a more substantial medium. Gaining the respect and approval of others is clearly an important component of the attitude, but one wonders why a people otherwise so self-loving and self-accepting should need their self-esteem repeatedly validated by others. Perhaps the most important reason behind the villagers' concern with impressing others really has little to do with the others themselves, although obviously at the behavioral level it implicates them—that is, I would suggest that the major factor behind the